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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003826

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/13/2026  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: JUMBLATT ON CURRENT SITUATION

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) Walid Jumblatt told the Ambassador on 12/12 that the Siniora cabinet and March 14 should be credited for three major accomplishments during the current political crisis: 1) Standing firm, remaining united and in office. 2) Approving the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. 3) Bringing Nasrallah "down to earth." But, despite general satisfaction with the March 14 performance, Jumblatt did not see a quick or easy end to the current crisis, accusing Syria of preferring chaos in Lebanon to the success of the Siniora government. He did not offer new ideas for moving ahead but said that he concurred with the general sense among the March 14 leaders that a March 14 concession regarding the cabinet -- whether brokered by Amr Moussa or others -- should be matched by an acceptable replacement for Lebanese President Emile Lahoud. For the first time, Jumblatt spoke about partition of Lebanon. While he touched on this subject only momentarily, his words suggested he has given partition much thought. On the tribunal, he balanced the pluses and minuses of delaying parliamentary action to meet a request by Nabih Berri but did not come to a conclusion. End summary.

RELIEF: 12/12 POTENTIAL PROBLEMS  
DID NOT MATERIALIZE  
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12. (C) Jumblatt hosted a dinner on 12/12 for the Ambassador, MP Faysal Sayegh (Druse, Jumblatt bloc), and former MP (and advisor to Saad Hariri) Ghattas Khoury. Jumblatt expressed relief and satisfaction with how events had unfolded that day: large numbers of Sunni and Druse supporters of March 14 had come out to join the Christian crowds for the memorial mass for MP Gibran Tuani (assassinated a year ago), and the LAF had provided good security for the cabinet meeting, in which the 17 remaining cabinet members approved the documents for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Jumblatt also was pleased that the March 8 Sunni cleric Fathi Yaqin had visited Michel Aoun earlier in the day and -- citing Sunni sensitivities -- publicly distanced himself from Aoun's suggestion of storming the Grand Serail and yanking Fouad Siniora from office. "Even the Sunnis with Syria are embarrassed by what is going on," Jumblatt said. He commenting that former PM Omar Karami had been scheduled to speak at the Sunday Hizballah-Aoun rally but had been prevented from doing so by his horrified family, hoping to preserve some Karami political influence in Tripoli. Khoury agreed with Jumblatt that the "Lebanonization" of Tripoli, once a stronghold of pro-Syrian

sentiments, is one unexpected positive outcome of the current political crisis.

FIRST ACCOMPLISHMENT: STAYING PUT

13. (C) Tilting at an angle back in his chair, Jumblatt told his guests that, in general, the Siniora cabinet and March 14 leaders had performed well during the crisis that began with the 11/11 resignation by the Shia ministers. "Look at what's happened," Jumblatt said, ticking off attacks that included the 11/21 murder of Minister Pierre Gemayel, demonstrations, bellicose declarations of cabinet illegitimacy, reports of Palestinian and al-Qaida terrorists infiltrating into Lebanon, and so forth. But the cabinet has not crumbled. Not even those ministers whose loyalties are sometimes suspect -- Charles Rizk, Elias Murr, and Mohamed Safadi (who is often thought to be conniving with Aoun to become premier under an Aoun presidency) -- have succumbed to the pressure. Just staying in office and projecting the image of a legitimate, constitutional cabinet is an accomplishment, Jumblatt said. The unity and sense of purpose also applied to March 14 leaders and supporters more broadly, Jumblatt said, as people stuck together rather than split apart under the Hizballah-Aoun pressure.

SECOND ACCOMPLISHMENT:  
PASSAGE OF THE TRIBUNAL

14. (C) In what he described as a second impressive accomplishment, Jumblatt cited the cabinet's successful passage of the documents setting up the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. He expressed worry that Syria will answer the cabinet's reaffirmation of its approval (which overrides the

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objections of President Lahoud) with "more killing," just as Syria (presumably) responded to the 11/13 cabinet decision to pass the tribunal the first time by murdering Pierre Gemayel on 11/21. But, nevertheless, the cabinet decision illustrated to Syria and its Lebanese allies that the tribunal "will happen, no matter what they do." The Ambassador commented that we are starting to pick up some hesitations from March 14 supporters that perhaps it is time to back off on pushing the tribunal, that the price being paid in terms of Lebanon's stability is too high. Some people are recommending putting the tribunal aside and picking it later, when the political atmosphere improves. Jumblatt disagreed, saying that March 14 leaders remain united that the tribunal is "our best weapon against the Syrians. We need to push it now, before we're all killed."

THIRD ACCOMPLISHMENT: CRITICIZING  
NASRALLAH IS NO LONGER OFF-LIMITS

15. (C) The third significant GOL-March 14 accomplishment over the last month, Jumblatt said, was to "bring Hassan Nasrallah down to earth." For too long, Jumblatt said, it was a taboo to criticize Nasrallah. "He was a saint, untouchable." Six months ago it would have been inconceivable to have a point-by-point rebuttal of Nasrallah's speech, such as Fouad Siniora delivered on national television on Friday. While acknowledging that he was in the vanguard of this trend, Jumblatt ticked off a list of national figures now on record as criticizing Nasrallah openly. His most recent example Greek Orthodox Archbishop Elias Audi, who delivered a sermon at the Gibran Tueni memorial sharply critical of Nasrallah's pretensions to speak for Lebanon and the Hizballah-Aoun tactics to topple Siniora's cabinet. While Nasrallah's followers are still "drunk" and may be in large part unsalvageable, Jumblatt thought that in general the rest of Lebanon now saw Nasrallah as yet another flawed Lebanese politician. Jumblatt also argued that Nasrallah's stature in the Arab world has sharply

eroded, given the image of a Shia movement attacking Lebanon's Sunni PM.

TOYING WITH BERRI'S REQUEST TO DELAY  
PARLIAMENTARY ACTION ON THE TRIBUNAL  
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¶6. (C) Returning to the tribunal, the Ambassador shared with Jumblatt a message that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri had passed via his foreign policy advisor Ali Hamdan just prior to Jumblatt's dinner: Berri asked the Ambassador's help in getting March 14 leaders, savoring their cabinet victory regarding the tribunal, to now "put the agreement in a drawer for a while" rather than attempt to force parliamentary ratification now. Hamdan hinted that Berri wanted to save the parliament (presumably from Shia and Aounist mass resignations), which he would not be able to do if March 14 pushed for parliamentary action now. Jumblatt toyed with the idea, orally listing advantages and disadvantages to insisting upon parliamentary action now versus giving Berri the delay he wanted.

¶7. (C) Khoury played his characteristic zealot role, saying that the 70 surviving March 14 MPs should force a showdown with Berri to get the tribunal approved now; after all, Khoury said, the tribunal will have the power to hand out the sorts of indictments that will at last "scare the Syrians into behaving." Jumblatt said that, before making up his mind, he would at least acknowledge Berri's request by either meeting with Berri or sending him a messenger. "I also need to consult with Saad (Hariri) and Samir (Ja'ja')." (On 12/13, the Ambassador met separately with Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad and Minister of Justice Charles Rizk and raised Berri's request. Rizk was amenable to acceding to Berri's request: "What difference does it make if we give it to parliament now or later? We aren't going to activate the tribunal tomorrow anyway." Mouawad, however, took the opposite view. She argued that laying the tribunal aside would allow Syria and its allies to take numerous steps to make sure that the tribunal is never activated. If parliamentary action is to be postponed, she argued, then it should be replaced by a Chapter VII resolution by the UNSC in order to establish the tribunal quickly.)

SYRIA NOT CONCERNED ABOUT CHAOS, CIVIL WAR  
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¶8. (C) The Ambassador asked Jumblatt about the next steps.

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Jumblatt said that he did not know but that he did not expect Nasrallah and Aoun to back down. "How can they?" The Ambassador noted that Nasrallah has a knack for convincing his followers that a defeat is a victory (i.e., a "divine victory" in the summer consisted of Hizballah installations being destroyed, Shia houses and villages damaged extensively, and Hizballah losing its freedom of action in south Lebanon); would Nasrallah agree to less than his demands but sell it to his followers to end the crisis? Jumblatt said that he expected Syria would not let Nasrallah back down, any more than Syria would permit Nabih Berri some freedom of maneuver. Syria does not care if Lebanon erupts into chaos or a Sunni-Shia civil war. The Ambassador asked whether the Syrian regime wouldn't be worried that, if Hizballah overplays its cards, there could be Sunni unhappiness in Syria. Shrugging, Jumblatt said that, "if you don't get rid of them (the Asads), you at least need to find a way to pressure them before they get rid of all of us." Jumblatt had no new ideas for moving ahead.

WORRIED THAT MOUSSA WILL  
SIDE WITH MARCH 8-AOUN  
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¶9. (C) Asked about the Amr Moussa initiative, Jumblatt said that he remained open-minded, based on one principle: a loss

of March 14 weight in the cabinet had to be balanced by a loss of March 8 weight in the presidency. "Trade the cabinet expansion for the President," Jumblatt said, saying that March 14 leaders were united on that point and looked at all diplomatic initiatives in that context. Jumblatt worried that Moussa would be too eager for a deal and thus would end up pressuring the "softer," more reasonable side -- March 14 and the Siniora cabinet -- into making damaging concessions. There is a real danger that Moussa will see that Hizballah, Berri, and Aoun aren't going to adjust their positions, especially since Hizballah and Berri probably have limited flexibility from Syria. But rather than admit failure, Moussa will then try to disguise the Hizballah-Aoun positions in "fancy words and fancy little things that don't matter." March 8 and Aoun forces will accept the repackaged version of their own demands, and March 14 will look intransigent. "We need the presidency," Jumblatt argued, also expressing worry about how the one "neutral" minister in a 19-10-1 split cabinet would be selected.

COMMENT

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¶10. (C) Jumblatt (backed up by Marwan Hamadeh) is the most wily and experienced of the major political leaders on the side of March 14. Saad Hariri is new to the game and often naive; Foad Siniora's technocratic background sometimes (although increasingly less frequently) makes him too ready for a deal; Ja'ja' has been too isolated first in prison and now in the Cedars to be involved in day-to-day give-and-take.

So Jumblatt is the most likely of the March 14 crowd to spot a trap in any initiative Amr Moussa tries to promote, and we look forward to his reactions of Moussa's ideas. Over lunch with the Ambassador and emboff on 12/13, UN envoy Geir Pedersen told us that he sees no sign of Hizballah backing down from its insistence on a blocking minority within the cabinet as the essential first step to any comprehensive deal. Jumblatt believes such a step, unless preceded by or combined with a new president, would be capitulation, with March 8-Aoun then able to control the agenda, including the presidential electoral outcome. We agree. But in terms of pushing for a new presidency now as compensation for whatever cabinet deal Moussa promotes, we see no signs that any real progress has been made.

FELTMAN